

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Denver, Colorado

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Posted: April 29th, 2013

Overview

The sixteenth most populous metropolitan area in the United States, Denver is the capital of the state of Colorado that includes communities in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Clear Creek, Denver, Douglas, Gilpin, Jefferson, and Weld Counties. Most recent population estimates for the Denver Metropolitan Area are as high as 3.3 million.[1] Non-Latino Whites constitute the majority of the population (66.6%) whereas Latinos constitute 22.1% of the population. Other ethnicities include African American (4.9%), Asian (3.8%), multiracial (2.0%), Native American (0.5%), and Pacific Islander (0.1%).[2] Although no specific data is available on the breakdown of language use within the home for the Denver area, languages most commonly spoken in the home in Colorado include English (3.7 million), Spanish (543,752), German (29,255), Vietnamese (18,275), French (17,837), Chinese languages (16,336), Korean (15,469), and Russian (15,298) according to most recent estimates.[3] Christians constitute a strong majority and are primarily Catholic or Protestant.

This case study reviews the growth of the Church in the Denver area and examines successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in Denver to other major cities in the United States and provides a brief synopsis of the growth of other outreach-oriented faiths. A limitations section identifies weaknesses to data and methodology utilized in this case study. Lastly, a future prospects section predicts the outlook for future church growth within the foreseeable future.

LDS Background

Latter-day Saints have continuously resided in the Denver area since the late 1890s. In 1896, the Church opened its first mission in Denver that is today known as the Colorado Denver South Mission. The Church created its first stake in the Denver area in 1940, today known as the Denver Colorado Stake. Additional stakes were organized in Arvada (1959), Lakewood (1964), Boulder (1973), Denver North (1973), Littleton (1973), Columbine (1980), Aurora (1981), Golden (1983), Willow Creek [renamed Highlands Ranch in 1998] (1985), Arapahoe (1987), Parker (1996), Westminster (1997), Castle Rock (2004), and Parker South (2011). The number of stakes totaled one in 1950, two in 1960, three in 1970, seven in 1980, 11 in 1990, 13 in 2000, 14 in 2010, and 15 in early 2013.

In 1982, the Church announced a temple for Denver. The Denver Colorado Temple was dedicated in 1986. In 1993, a second mission in Denver was organized (Colorado Denver North). In 2002, the Church created a separate mission based in Colorado Springs that also serviced areas of the southern Denver metro area such as Castle Rock and Parker. In 2013, the Church realigned the three missions in the Front Range to create a fourth mission based in Fort Collins.

Congregational growth in the Denver area occurred among general English-speaking family units, young single adult (YSA) units, and Spanish-speaking units within the past decade. The number of wards and branches increased from 117 in 2002 to 138 in early 2013. In 2002, there were two Spanish-speaking wards based from stakes in Aurora and Lakewood. By early 2013, there were four Spanish-speaking wards headquartered from stakes in Arapahoe, Aurora, Denver North, and Lakewood. The number of YSA and student units in the Denver area multiplied from approximately four in early 2004 to 11 in early 2013. Of the 15 stakes in the Denver area, seven reported an increase in the number of congregations (Arapahoe, Castle Rock, Denver North, Highlands Ranch, Parker, Parker South, and Westminster), two reported no change in the number of congregations (Aurora and Boulder), and six reported a decline in the number of congregations (Arvada, Columbine, Denver, Golden, Lakewood, and Littleton).

Local member reports indicate that sacrament meeting attendance for the majority of wards in the Denver area ranges from 100 to 300. Some wards baptize as many as 10-14 converts a year whereas others baptize fewer than five. Most English-speaking congregations are predominantly white with small numbers of Latinos and African Americans. Member reports indicate that larger numbers of converts have joined the Church from ethnic minority groups or those who have economic challenges than from white, middle-class families. Historically, most congregations have their own set of full-time missionaries or share a missionary companionship with one other ward. Higher baptizing congregations have also reported greater welfare needs and often greater inactivity challenges. Approximately 18 endowment sessions are scheduled daily at the Denver Colorado Temple from Tuesdays through Saturdays, indicating moderate to good member activity rates and use of the temple.

In the late 2000s, the Colorado Denver South Mission generally baptized between 500 and 750 converts a year. At the time missionaries estimated that between 40-50% of converts remained active one year after baptism. In the early 2010s, returned missionaries from the Colorado Denver South Mission reported 200-300 baptisms for most years and 30% convert retention for one year after baptism. Young single adults (YSAs) constitute a significant portion of convert baptisms throughout the Denver area. Higher receptivity to missionary work generally occurs in lower income areas such as Lakewood and Englewood whereas lower receptivity generally occurs in higher income areas such as Highlands Ranch and Centennial.

No current official membership figures for the Denver area are available. In 2004, there were approximately 60,000 nominal Latter-day Saints in the Denver area.[4] Maps are available displaying stakes, wards, and branches in the Denver area for 2002 and present day.

Successes

The Church in the Denver area has experienced moderate levels of growth within the past decade. The total number of wards and branches increased from 117 to 138 between 2002 and early 2013; an 18% increase. Congregational growth is one of the most robust indicators of active membership growth as new congregations are generally organized to meet the needs of growing numbers of members attending church and sufficient numbers of priesthood leaders to fill leadership. The number of new units created has surpassed the number of units discontinued resulting in a net growth in congregations that has necessitated the organization of two new stakes in 2004 and 2011 in Castle Rock and Parker, respectively.

Member activity rates in most congregations generally range from moderate to high. Local member reports indicate that activity rates are as high as 50% in wards within stakes that have experienced congregational decline within the past decade notwithstanding many of these locations reporting modest convert retention rates and dwindling numbers of active members due to active families relocating to newer suburbs. Many wards in locations that have experienced congregational decline appear to have between 200 and 300 active members notwithstanding steady numbers of active, full-member families moving out of these areas. Most wards in newer communities on the peripheries of the Denver area report large numbers of new move-ins and have member activity rates that generally range from 40-60%.

The Church has achieved excellent progress opening additional congregations for specialized populations, namely Spanish-speakers and YSAs. The number of Spanish-speaking units doubled in the 2000s due to active membership growth among Spanish speakers and larger numbers of Spanish-speaking full-time missionaries assigned. One ward - the Monte Vista (Spanish) Ward - was organized from a dependent unit in the Denver Colorado North Stake in the late 2000s and completely skipped branch status due to leadership development and active membership growth. The proliferation of YSA/student units from four in early 2004 to 11 in early 2013 constitutes a major success for the Church in reaching out to YSA members in the Denver area. In early 2013, 11 of the 15 stakes in the Denver area had a YSA or student congregation under its administration.

There has been some success achieving growth in inner-city areas. In the early 2000s, membership in some inner-city wards tripled within a matter of a few years due to new move-ins and convert baptisms.[5] In the early 2004, the Church completed a new chapel from renovating a former art institute, effectively creating its first real inner-city presence in over 25 years.[6] In early 2013, the building housed two wards that serviced areas in the Denver inner-city.

There has been success improving the collaboration between local leaders, ordinary members, and full-time missionaries in missionary work and reactivation. Returned missionaries have reported that the 15 names program was a successful method for reactivation and finding investigators through less-active members. The program consisted of focusing reactivation efforts on five families from Relief Society, five families from Elder's Quorum, and five families from the High Priests group in each ward or branch. The identification of particular families by local leaders and the collaborative effort of full-time missionaries and ordinary members to reach out to these families has resulted in some successes in reactivation and baptizing converts from part-member families.

Opportunities

The Denver area has a large population with a sizable church presence that is within close proximity to church headquarters. There are good opportunities for member-missionary work among a large nonmember population and sufficient administrative infrastructure in most areas to accommodate large numbers of converts. Most people in Denver have at least one LDS friend, neighbor, or acquaintance as Latter-day Saints account for approximately three percent of the state population. Approaches

that may be effective in augmenting the number of convert baptisms and improving convert retention rates include LDS youth inviting nonmember friends to their homes for a dinner appointment with the full-time missionaries, using the Boy Scout program as a passive missionary tool, and local members identifying recent move-ins to a community and befriending these individuals.

There are good opportunities for expanding outreach among Latinos and other ethnic minority groups. The formation of Spanish-speaking Sunday School classes and dependent units in individual stakes with sizable numbers of Spanish-speaking members and investigators may be an effective method for accelerating growth. Areas that appear favorable for the formation of additional Spanish-speaking Sunday School classes, groups, or branches include western and southern Denver suburbs, the Aurora area, and Westminster.

With the exception of Spanish speakers, the Church has no specialized congregations for ethnolinguistic minority groups. There appear good opportunities for extending outreach among Burmese/Karen, Hmong, Koreans, Mongolians, and Vietnamese. Denver boasts the largest number of Mongolians of any city in the world outside of Mongolia.[7] The rapid growth of the Church in Mongolia within the past two decades may indicate that Mongolians residing in the Denver area will be receptive to specialized outreach extended by Mongolian members called to serve missions in Colorado.

Challenges

The shift in LDS populations from aging suburbs to newly established, rapidly growing suburbs has created challenges for church administration, missionary work, and the augmentation of active membership. The redistribution of LDS populations has been the primary catalyst driving the creation of new congregations. Many older neighborhoods in suburban areas have undergone multiple ward consolidations such as in the Aurora, Columbine, Littleton, and Lakewood areas as active families relocate to newer communities in Castle Rock, Highlands Ranch, Parker, and Brighton. Distance to the nearest meetinghouse has appeared to reduce member activity rates in some wards primarily in locations within older neighborhoods and the inner city. With the exception of suburban communities on the outskirts of the city, no congregational growth has occurred in older areas of the Denver area within the past decade due to member move-outs and comparatively few retained converts. Six of the 15 stakes (Littleton, Golden, Columbine, Lakewood, Denver, and Arvada) reported fewer units in early 2013 than in 2002 and two stakes (Aurora and Boulder) reported no change in the number of units during this period.

The Church has experienced stagnant growth within the past decade in regards to increasing the percentage of members in the Denver area. The percentage increase in the number of congregations in the Denver area was less than the percentage increase in the total population. The number of congregations increased by 18% between 2002 and early 2013 whereas the metropolitan population increased by 21.5% between 2000 and 2011. This finding suggests that active membership grew at a rate slightly less than the general population during this period as congregational growth is strongly correlated with active membership growth. This has likely resulted in a slight decrease in the percentage of active Latter-day Saints in the Denver area population. Population growth outpacing LDS unit growth in the Denver area is a concerning development as natural growth in the Church in the United States generally outpaces the growth of the general population due to higher birth rates in LDS families, regardless of missionary efforts that yield small numbers of new converts year to year.

Local members indicate that a weak testimony in the Church, becoming offended by a member or local church leader, poor fellowshipping from members, long distance to the assigned meetinghouse, inadequate prebaptismal preparation, and doctrinal concerns are the most common reasons for inactivity in older neighborhoods. Full-time missionaries report that cultural conditions, weak testimony in the Church, and poor fellowshipping from members are primary reasons for inactivity in the Denver area. Returned missionaries express that member participation in missionary work was modest to poor as many members were open about discussing their faith but did not extend invitations to learn more about the Church. Returned missionaries report that increasing secularism and religious beliefs dissimilar with LDS teachings were major deterrents to church growth and receptivity.

Local members have reported inadequate numbers of active priesthood holders in many older neighborhoods and inner-city areas. Welfare needs and leadership challenges in these locations have contributed to the establishment of odd, jigsaw puzzle-like boundaries for some stakes in order to incorporate enough active priesthood leaders from areas with recently constructed suburban communities into stakes that also service inner-city areas. For example, the Arapahoe Colorado Stake comprises a narrow strip of city that stretches from just north of downtown Denver to extreme southeastern Aurora. Leadership development and sustainability problems pose significant challenges for church planting in urban areas where there are relatively few active members and limited resources.

The Church only conducts specialized language outreach among Spanish speakers. The Church once operated a Laotian-speaking branch in the Westminster area during the late 1990s but closed the unit due to inactivity challenges. A lack of convert baptisms among ethnolinguistic minority groups and no church planting vision have contributed to no specialized units that service Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hmong, Burmese, and Karen speakers. Other Christian groups have provided consistent outreach among these minority groups and have shepherded many receptive individuals. There have been challenges establishing additional Spanish-speaking units in some locations. The Church organized a Spanish-speaking group in the Boulder Colorado Stake approximately a decade ago but continues to not have any Spanish-speaking branch or ward in the stake due to inactivity challenges and relatively few convert baptisms among Latinos.

Member activity rates among YSAs have been very low for many years. In the late 2000s, once CES employee estimated that

as few as 10% of YSAs in the Denver area attended church regularly. Other YSA church leaders have lamented often poor church participation among active members and question the depth of testimony in some members. Forming YSA units in stakes that currently do not have YSA congregations may be effective in reducing member attrition during young adulthood and revitalizing reactivation efforts. In early 2013, there were four stakes that did not have YSA units (Lakewood, Littleton, Parker, and Westminster). However, the likelihood of the Church organizing YSA units in these stakes appears unlikely for the foreseeable future. Three of these stakes - Lakewood, Littleton, and Westminster - primarily service older neighborhoods in the Denver area and have small numbers of congregations compared to other stakes whereas the Parker Colorado Stake recently divided and shares a YSA unit with the Parker Colorado South Stake. The Littleton Colorado Stake once had its own YSA branch but it was combined with a branch in the Highlands Ranch Colorado Stake to form a ward.

Comparative Growth

Denver was the fifth city east of the Rocky Mountains to receive a temple after Washington DC (1974), Atlanta Georgia (1983), Dallas Texas (1984), and Chicago Illinois (1985). The Denver Colorado Temple was the 40th temple dedicated by the Church among temples currently in operation. The Church has experienced growth trends in Denver similar to other major cities in the western United States. In Salt Lake City, the Church has consolidated wards and discontinued several stakes due to many active members relocating to newer subdivisions and suburban communities on the west and south sides of the Salt Lake City area such as Draper, Herriman, South Jordan, and West Jordan. In Las Vegas, the Church has experienced congregational decline in some stakes in older areas of the city as members have relocated to suburban communities such as Henderson. In the Phoenix area, the Church has consolidated a couple stakes in older, aging neighborhoods in Mesa and central Phoenix as many active members have moved to new communities in Chandler, Gilbert, and Queen Creek.

Other proselytizing Christian groups report a sizable presence in Denver but overall maintain fewer congregations than the LDS Church. In early 2013, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 62 congregations in the Denver area, including several congregations that held church services in minority languages such as Spanish, French, Indonesian, and Korean.[8] Adventists have experienced stagnant congregational growth and extremely slow membership growth in Colorado and Wyoming over the past decade.[9] Jehovah's Witnesses operate approximately 100 congregations in the Denver area; two-thirds of which are English speaking. Witnesses conduct worship services in 14 additional languages including Spanish (33 congregations), American Sign Language (two congregations), French (one congregation), Korean (one congregation), Russian (one congregation), Amharic (one group), Chinese (one group), Hmong (one group), Japanese (one group), Polish (one group), Portuguese (one group), Swahili (one group), Tagalog (one group), and Vietnamese (one group). Adventists and Witnesses operate more congregations in some areas of the city of Denver, Aurora, Lakewood, and Littleton than the LDS Church whereas the LDS Church reports significantly more congregations in outlying suburban communities such as Arvada, Castle Rock, Highlands Ranch, and Parker. The Church of the Nazarene reports approximately dozen churches in the Denver area.[10] The Baha'i Faith operates approximately two dozen communities in the Denver area.[11]

Limitations

There is no official data on the number of active members on a worldwide scale and on a city or state level. Trends in membership growth can only be deduced from inferences in congregational growth. The Church does not publish annual membership data on individual stakes and does not publish data on language usage and demographic characteristics. Consequently, there is little information on how trends in membership growth have varied from stake to stake aside from ascertaining this data from congregational growth. All data on demographic characteristics of LDS membership were obtained from local members and returned missionaries. The Church does not publish past congregational data on individual stakes and unit names for public consumption. Data from 2002 was ascertained from Marc A. Schindler's online LDS atlas.[12] It is unclear how many dependent branches and groups function in the Denver area as information on the location, size, and meeting times of dependent units is not published by the Church on its online meetinghouse locator. Data on the number of convert baptisms in Denver missions and convert retention rates one year after baptism were limited at the writing of this case study.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth in the Denver area is favorable due to steady numbers of convert baptisms, net congregational growth, and the success of establishing YSA congregations within the past decade. Reliance on new move-ins to achieve growth in most locations is a concern that does not result in real growth for the Church on a city, state, or country level. Population growth rates surpassing LDS congregational growth rates is a concerning development that suggests significant difficulties retaining youth and YSA members, and modest convert retention rates. Spanish speakers, less-active and part-member families, and the friends of LDS youth and YSAs will likely continue to be the most favorable demographics for missionary efforts to target due to higher receptivity. Ongoing congregational growth in some stakes such as Arapahoe, Castle Rock, and Denver North may warrant the creation of additional stakes within the foreseeable future.

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[12] https://cumorah.com/atlas/